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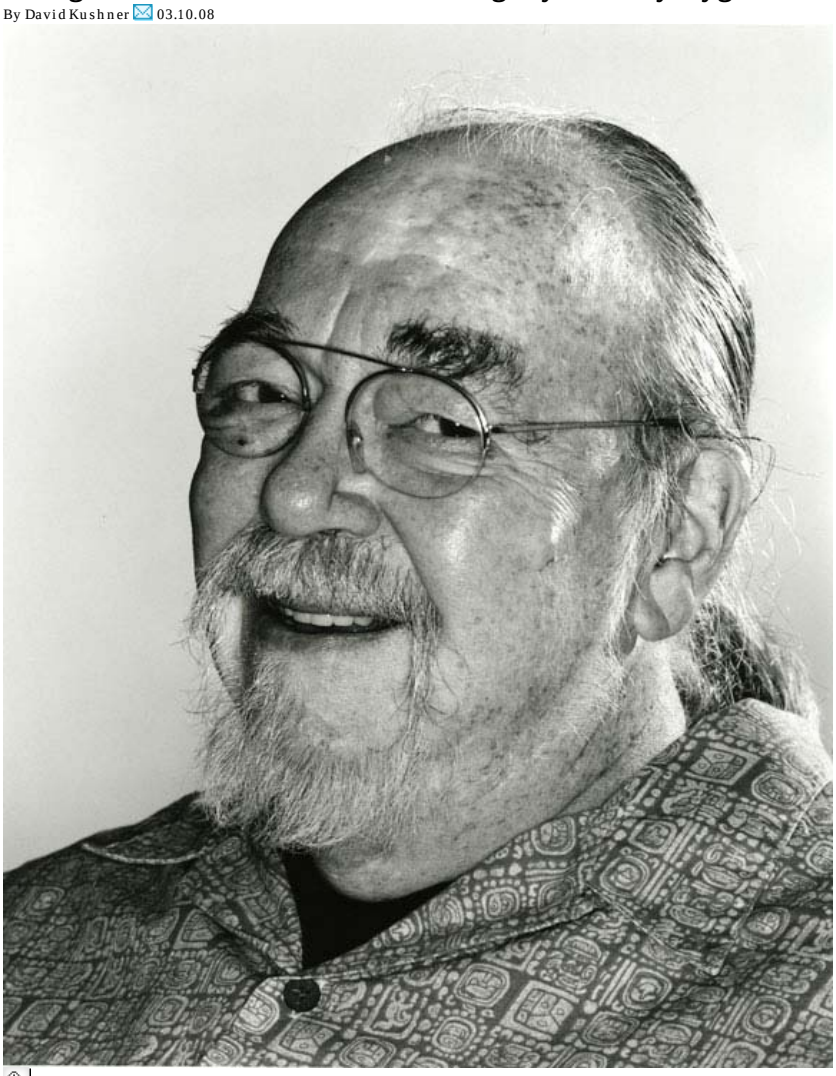
Dungeon Master: The Life and Legacy of Gary Gygax

By David Kushner 03.10.08



Gary Gygax was photographed during GenCon 2007.
Image: Rainer Hosch

Redesign the Wired.com Logo, Dungeons & Dragons-Style

Editor's note:* Wired *contributing editor David Kushner visited Gary Gygax at the Lake Geneva Convention last June. We were preparing a package of articles about the father of Dungeons & Dragons and the upcoming revised edition of the game he created when we received the sad news of his death. We are running this story now in remembrance of Gygax and in celebration of his staggering achievements. Later this month, we will run the additional articles about D&D as well as excerpts from the extensive interviews used in reporting this story. We extend our deepest condolences to Gygax's family.

You arrive at a small town by a large lake. Down a road, there is a yellow Victorian house with an American flag. There are revelers here. They stand on the front lawn swilling ale and eating from bountiful plates of ham and beans. They invite you to join their assembly.
As you approach, however, something catches your attention: a strange buzzing sound in the air. It's coming from the tiny winged beasts that are hanging from the trees, crawling along the ground, and crashing clumsily against you. "Cicadas," explains your host, a heavyset man with a gray ponytail and thick glasses that magnify his eyes. "It's a good thing they don't have mandibles." Then, quite cordially, he invites you inside his house to play a game.
The host is Gary Gygax, and the occasion is a game convention in his hometown of Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, this past June. Gygax, 68. is a cocreator and popularizer of the most influential game ever made. Dungeons & Dragons — D&D to fans — isn't a straightforward board game like Monopoly or Clue. It's more like an operating system, an elaborate framework on which players can build their own scenarios: Anyone with creativity and imagination can become a game designer.
D&D players create an alter ego and guide it through a virtual world, gradually upgrading abilities as they battle monsters and gather loot. The game allows teenage misfits to become mythic superheroes and face epic adventures and harrowing challenges. "It's written in

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every man's heart — we want to feel like warriors," Gygax's grandson tells me inside the family home. "That's what Gramps let people do."

Gygax was around 5 when he began taking an interest in strategy games like chess and pinochle. *Photo: Courtesy of Gail Gygax*

Most aspects of the game can be expressed numerically, from attributes like strength and health and intelligence to the power of a weapon and the probability that it will successfully connect with an enemy and the amount of damage it would inflict. But one player has to paint a picture with words: That person assumes the role of the dungeon master and describes for other players what they see and hear in this imaginary world, and what effects their actions have. The game is played primarily in your head, using graph paper maps to represent environments, figurines to represent your character, a die to determine probability, and a few rulebooks for reference.

Gygax forged an industry around D&D and made a small fortune in the process. His home-brew publishing company, Tactical Studies Rules, went from a basement enterprise to a thriving corporation with 600 employees in less than a decade. D&D sold millions of copies and has been translated into more than a dozen languages in at least 50 countries.

His creation is the cornerstone of geek culture, but it's also had a profound and far-reaching impact on people who have never touched a 20-sided die.

Now, this afternoon at his party, Gygax slowly lumbers into his house to a fetch a 20-sided die of his own. It is time to get his game on. Are you ready to begin?

You are Ernest Gary Gygax, a restless boy born in Chicago in 1938. Every summer, you head to your grandparents' home 80 miles away in Lake Geneva. You move there in 1946, just before your eighth birthday. You are skilled in hunting — whether taking out squirrels with a .22 or shooting wild pheasants with a 16-gauge shotgun. Your father, a suit salesman and a violinist, makes up bedtime stories for you, fantastical yarns about heroes with magic rings and invisibility cloaks.

It's a weekday morning in the early 1950s. You can choose to go to school and max out your grade point average, or you can play hooky and go explore the sepulchral system of tunnels underneath the old Oak Hill Sanitarium, an abandoned insane asylum near the lake. What do you want to do?

Like most kids, Gygax wanted to be the hero of his own life. "There's a call to adventure," he says. "It's something in the inner psyche of humanity, particularly males."

He was very bright, but tunnel-crawling held a lot more appeal than grinding away in the classroom. "I hated school, didn't like the discipline," he says. He dropped out in his junior year.

Gygax drifted a bit after high school. After working odd jobs during the day and attending junior college at night, he found a steady gig as an insurance underwriter for the Firemen's Fund. And after a lifelong love of chess and board games, he discovered a new diversion that would change his life: war games.

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This convention is dedicated to our beloved country. We delight in the beauty of its grandeur. We take pride in its power and strength. Above all else we sing the praises of our country because of the liberty, the freedom and the independence which it permits all people. This is dedicated to the greatest and most noble country that ever existed on the face of this tired world.

- Edward Friedman

A souvenir menu for 1967's International Federation of Wargaming convention in Pennsylvania says the fest "is dedicated to the greatest and most noble country that ever existed on the face of this tired world." *Photo: Courtesy of Gail Gygax*

Many trace the origin of war games to a 1913 work by H. G. Wells titled *Little Wars: A Game for Boys of Twelve Years of Age to One Hundred and Fifty and for that More Intelligent Sort of Girl Who Likes Boys' Games and Books*. In this 60-page book, Wells describes how he and a friend commandeered his son's toy soldiers and made up a game that involved situating them on an imaginary battlefield and taking turns maneuvering them for tactical advantage. Wells explained the many iterations he'd gone through while perfecting the rules and laid them out in great detail so that readers could play the game themselves.

Gygax and his friends would build detailed tabletop recreations of famous battlefields — say, Gettysburg — and position on it toys representing battalions of infantry, cavalry, and artillery emplacements. Armed with rulers and protractors, they would take turns moving their units in carefully measured increments. Skirmishes were resolved by a roll of the dice, and one player served as referee and judge, settling disputes over the finer points of rules and historical accuracy. Gygax married in 1958 and had two children by 1961, but he continued to spend much of his free time locked in epic imaginary battles, some of which lasted for months. He played the game in his basement with fellow members of the Lake Geneva Tactical Studies Association, but he also played by mail with other war gamers across the country.

A group of gamers huddle in an intense session during an early meeting of the International Federation of Wargaming in the late 1960s. *Photo: Courtesy of Gail Gygax*

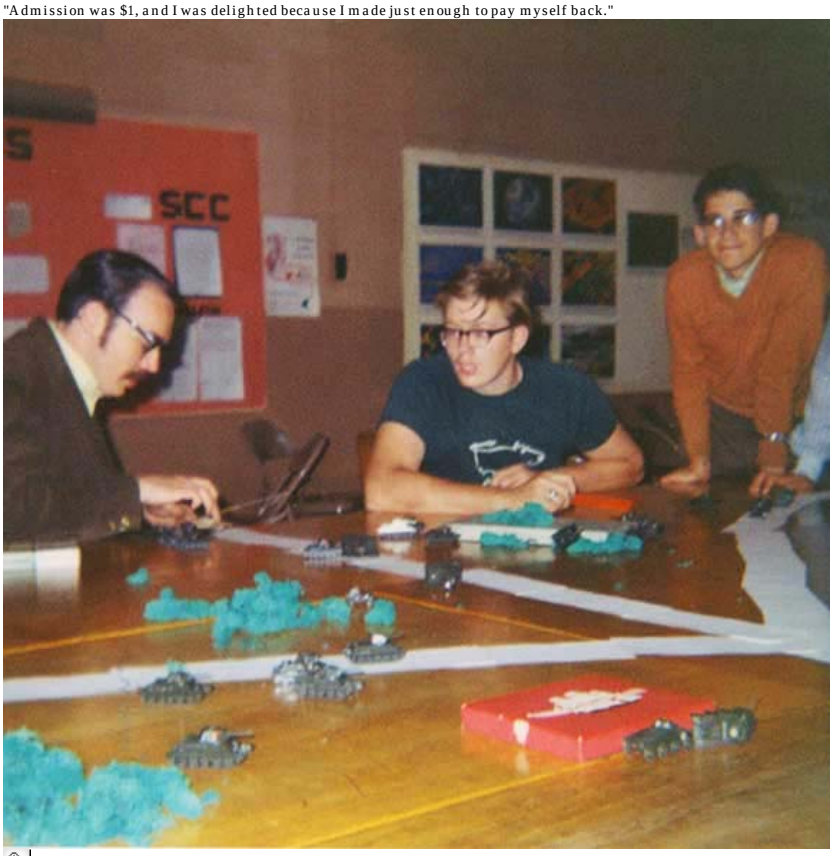
Gygax was fascinated by the way the rolling of dice affected — and enlivened — the game experience. "Random chance plays a huge part in everybody's life," he says. He learned this first hand in his job as an insurance underwriter, which was a game in itself. His work involved evaluating policies and calculating how much to charge in premiums based on salary, age, medical reports, and the potential for long-term disabilities. He did special risk underwriting as well, such as evaluating the payout for a Major League Baseball team that wanted to take out a policy on one of its players. "I wasn't popular in the home office because I wasn't chicken," he says. "I'm just a risk taker. I have gut instincts."

Gygax took similar liberties in war games. He had little time for people who played too by-the-book. "They'd write in and ask the publisher of the game what to do," he says. "Whatever they were told, they did. And I said, that's silly — just make it up."

Gygax and a few of his buddies carried that DIY spirit even further, devising a game of their own around WWII tank combat. He was determined that his game would avoid the "goofy bell curve" that resulted from rolling a pair of six-sided dice (2s and 12s are rare, while 6s, 7s, and 8s are comparatively frequent). To achieve a more linear curve, he determined that players must pluck 1 of 20 numbered poker chips from a hat, so that there was an equal 5 percent probability of each outcome. Gygax later found the perfect replacement for this clunky system: In a school supply catalog, he discovered dice shaped like all of the Platonic solids, including the icosahedron: A 20-sided die.

Gygax's inventiveness and his organizational skills led him to put together the first Lake Geneva Convention — GenCon for short — at

his hometown's vine-covered Horticultural Hall in 1968. (A semiofficial gathering took place the year before at Gygax's home.) Left-brained wannabe generals from all over the US and Canada came to do battle. "I coughed up 50 bucks to rent the hall," he says. "Admission was $1, and I was delighted because I made just enough to pay myself back."



Gygax plays military miniatures at the 1970 GenCon in Madison, Wisconsin. GenCon is the annual gaming convention for war-game enthusiasts he founded. First convened at Gygax's Lake Geneva home, GenCon is now one of the largest gaming conventions in North America. *Photo: Courtesy of John Bobek*[1]

Gygax's growing circle of gamer friends introduced him to many tweaked and modified versions of existing games. One night, friend Jeff Perren brought over some miniatures from the medieval title Siege of Bodenberg. Perren even had four pages of rules, which Gygax loved and expanded into an entirely new game: 16 pages of instructions that he dubbed Chainmail.

In other war games, each miniature represented a unit — say, 10 or 20 men — and could be destroyed with a single successful attack. Gygax decided to make some of the miniatures in Chainmail represent a single character, designated "hero" or "superhero," who could only be killed by several attacks. For the hell of it, Gygax included a supplemental set of rules that featured magical fantasy trappings: dragons, elves, wizards, and fireballs. He was a fan of the *Conan the Barbarian* books by Robert E. Howard and wanted to try to capture that sort of swashbuckling action in a war game. (Interestingly, he loathed the major fantasy touchstone of the time, J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* series. "It was so dull. I mean, there was no action in it," Gygax says. "I'd like to throttle Frodo.")

Few of the history buff war gamers appreciated how Gygax's innovative twists had personalized the play experience. They couldn't get past the magical aspects, which they viewed as folly at best, heresy at worst. "They wouldn't speak to me," Gygax says. But a friend who'd started a small game company offered to publish it, and Gygax agreed. He'd left the insurance business by then and was eking out a living as a cobbler. Chainmail: Rules for Medieval Miniatures was released in 1971 for $3 and soon became the publisher's biggest hit yet — selling 100 copies a month. It wasn't making him rich, but Gygax started to wonder if designing games could be not just a hobby, but a full-time job.

You are Dave Arneson, a 21-year-old history student at the University of Minnesota and part-time security guard. You spend most of your salary buying sodas for your buddies, who meet to play games in your parent's basement. You hole up in the school library, doing exhaustive research to make your war games more accurate. It recently occurred to you that you might get better grades if you didn't interrupt your teachers to argue the finer points of history. You journey from the Twin Cities to attend the second Lake Geneva Convention in August 1969. You meet Gary Gygax there, and you can't help but be a bit awed — after all, he's one of the biggest movers and shakers in the whole Midwestern war-gaming scene! He tells you he's trying to create a rule set around naval combat during the War of 1812, and he's very impressed that you can rattle off prices of muskets and rations and frigates during that era. He asks you to collaborate on the game with him. Do you accept?

There was one war gamer who grokked the importance of Gygax's Chainmail right away: Dave Arneson. The two had recently worked together on a sailing war game called Don't Give Up the Ship. Arneson saw Gygax as a bit of an obsessive, overly concerned with codifying and documenting things. "Gary added this really lame section about single-ship actions to our game, which nobody ever uses," says Arneson with a chuckle. Gygax says Arneson "wasn't much of a risk taker, didn't cut school, probably never got into fisticuffs. Our personalities weren't at all alike." But their common love of gaming overcame their differences.

When Arneson saw Chainmail, he was very intrigued by its potential for free-form, improvisatory play. It was similar to the game scenarios that one of his game groups in the Twin Cities had been experimenting with. "We didn't have volumes of rules and people arguing about historical accuracy," Arneson recalls. "In one game, we all ended up chasing a South American dictator as he was trying to escape with his comic book collection."

Arneson modified Chainmail for his own group's purposes. He took the action underground, like the claustrophobic sets of the Hammer Film Productions horror flicks he watched. Corridors. Tunnels. Caves. "A dungeon is nice and self-contained," he says. "Players can't go romping over the countryside, and you can control the situation."

Arneson tested his Chainmail mod in play sessions with his group and, based on their feedback, continued to tinker with the rules to make it more fun. "We had to change the combat system because we added more monsters. They were getting big and gruesome."

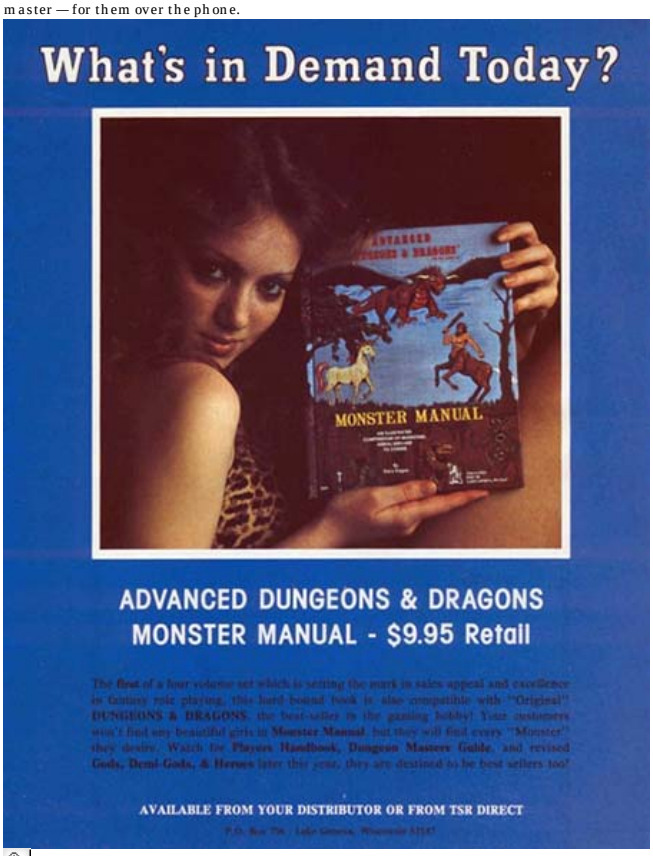
There was another aspect of the game he wanted to tweak: the fact that it ended. Arneson's group was having too much fun playing these specific roles to want to part with them after a single game. Outside of the individual games, Arneson created an experience system for characters. Your character would earn experience points based on their success from game to game. After a certain number of poins, a character would "level up."

To help move the story along, Arneson assumed a more elaborate role than that of the referees used to resolve disputes in war games. He would be the game master – setting the scene, guiding players along their quests. After developing the game, dubbed Blackmoor, for about six months with his group in Minnesota, Arneson and a couple of his buddies trekked back to Lake Geneva in late 1971 to run a game for Gygax and his crew. "Six-level dungeon, you start on the first floor and you go to the others by taking staircases," Gygax says. "We ran into a troll with magic armor, and we fought him and killed him and took it." The Wisconsinites all loved it. Arneson had successfully distilled the involved tactical military campaigns into a virtual world of first-person action.

Gygax effused over the "fun house" aspect of the game, which he said reminded him of exploring the tunnels under the insane asylum as a child. The game session ended at midnight, and Gygax immediately saw commercial potential in this variant of his Chainmail. "I think we can make something special out of that," he told Arneson.

Arneson soon agreed to collaborate again. Back at home, he ran off a copy of his notes on his dad's Xerox machine and mailed them to Gygax, who "couldn't make heads or tails" of the "generally useless" notes. "He sent me a couple of drafts to look over, and we talked on the phone a lot," Arneson says. "You should see the phone bills we ran up." But Gygax boiled down the disparate elements into a cohesive set

of rules. "He could type, and I couldn't," Arneson says.
The two had what amounted to philosophical differences. "He thinks you can write a rule to cover any situation," Arneson says. "I don't. There are just too many possibilities, especially when you're asking people to use their imaginations." Gygax broke the characters down into a variety of classes, such as magic users and clerics, and expanded the list of weapons, from morning stars to flails. "He was always big on having different weapons have different effects," Arneson says. "Years later, he literally had a small book on different kinds of polearms, which I regard as the ultimate in silliness. It's a pointy thing on the end of a stick!"
Gygax didn't see himself as rigid and rule bound. In his mind, he was creating a coherent framework, a comprehensible rule set...a salable product. Once he had a near-final set of rules, he went into his study, a small room off his kitchen. He placed an 8 1 2 by 11-inch sheet of graph paper on his desk and began sketching out a dungeon. He drew little passageways and rooms, numbering each room to correspond to 16 encounters. Designing the game was like building a haunted mansion and setting traps with monsters and treasure.
When he was through developing his game that night, he assembled his own team of testers. His friend Don Kaye, two of his children, 11-year-old Ernie and 9-year-old Elise, and a kid from up the street. The first step is to develop characters, he explained. Ernie chose to be a warrior, Elise, an elf. Gygax then handed out index cards that listed six attributes on each: strength, intelligence, wisdom, constitution, dexterity, and charisma. Each player would roll three six-sided die to generate a value for each character attribute. The higher the intelligence, for example, the better spells a wizard could cast; the higher the dexterity, the shrewder the thief. "It helped the person to get into the role that they were playing," he says. "If they had a real low intelligence they could play it like, 'Duh, OK.'"
Once the players had formed their characters, Gygax assumed the role of dungeon master. "There is a ruined castle that you have heard is filled with strange monsters and treasures, and you want to get them," he explained. "Your object is to slay the monsters and take their treasures and become more powerful. Go!" The players would make choices — go east, open a door — and Gygax would riff on what happened. When things got slow, he would roll a die and say, "Why are you standing in this dead-end corridor trying to look for a secret door? The Orcs have you cornered! Now you must fight them!"
Gygax watched with delight as this new form of entertainment came into being. He wasn't simply guiding the other players — he was a participant as well, watching it unfold and go in directions he'd never anticipated. "Role-playing isn't storytelling," he says, "If the dungeon master is directing it, it's not a game."
His creation only lacked one thing now — a name. Gygax paired random mythic words like fantasy, adventure, swords, and sorcery until he came to one his 4-year-old daughter Cindy approved of. "Oh, Daddy," she said, "I like Dungeons & Dragons the best!"
Gygax took D&D to Avalon Hill, the biggest war game publisher in the business. He described it to them and insisted that it would be a huge hit. "I think we can sell 50,000 copies of it," he boldly predicted. Avalon had no interest in D&D. "They couldn't understand a game with no winners and losers that just went on and on," Arneson says.
In 1973, Gygax formed a company called Tactical Studies Rules with childhood buddy Kaye. They didn't ask Arneson to join. "Dave was never considered as a partner," Gygax says."We didn't figure he was the kind of the guy who would be too good at running a business." Arneson agrees. "Gary was willing to go and make the pitches," he says. "I was having fun."
TSR scraped together $2,400 for startup costs. In January 1974, it ran off a thousand copies of the 150-page booklet titled, *Dungeons & Dragons: Rules for Fantastic Medieval Wargame Campaigns Playable with Paper and Pencil and Miniature Figures*. The rules cost $10. The extra dice you needed to play the game were $3.50 extra. The base of operations was Gygax's basement, and there wasn't a marketing budget. D&D would live and die by word of mouth.
Wizard's Spell: Chain Lightning
Range: 40 yards
Duration: Instantaneous
This spell creates an electrical discharge that begins as a single stroke of lightning, 2 12 feet wide, commencing from the fingertips of the caster.
D&D's impact was as instantaneous as a chain lightning spell. It spread from college to college, hobby shop to hobby shop, schoolyard to schoolyard. Ten months after D&D's launch, TSR sold out its press run and printed twice as many copies of the game. Soon it had sold out again, wiping mold off the last few copies in Gygax's musty cellar to fill orders. Players began calling Gygax's house at all hours of the night, asking for the volume of space covered by a certain spell, or asking him to test their game design by DMing — being a dungeon master — for them over the phone.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Gygax's daughter, Elise Gygax, poses for a 1977 advertisement for *Monster Manual*, the definitive sourcebook for the creatures in *D&D*. *Photo: Courtesy of Gail Gygax*
TSR made profitable upgrades to its operating system (The Advanced D&D Handbook soon appeared, along with the hardback *Monster Manual* by Gygax that simply gave descriptions and numerical attributes of the many different kinds of foul creatures that players might face). Anyone could build individual applications that ran on top of the rules, but TSR also sold the equivalent of software. For about $5, you could buy these prepackaged campaigns and scenarios by Arneson or Gygax or other emerging stars of the tabletop gaming industry.
"The modules were even more profitable than the rules were," Arneson says, who over the course of the 1970s saw the effect that D&D had on the gaming audience. "The whole tenor of the crowd changed," he says. "War gamers sat around talking about the latest historical books, but these D&D guys were from the science fiction community. And there were women! You go from having none at a convention to having — *whoo!* — 20 percent women! No groupies though, darn it..."
The creators of D&D became folk heroes...and targets. Arneson had to stop participating in impromptu games with strangers after a fresh young punk lured him into a losing scenario. "He spent the rest of the convention telling everyone how his dungeon had killed

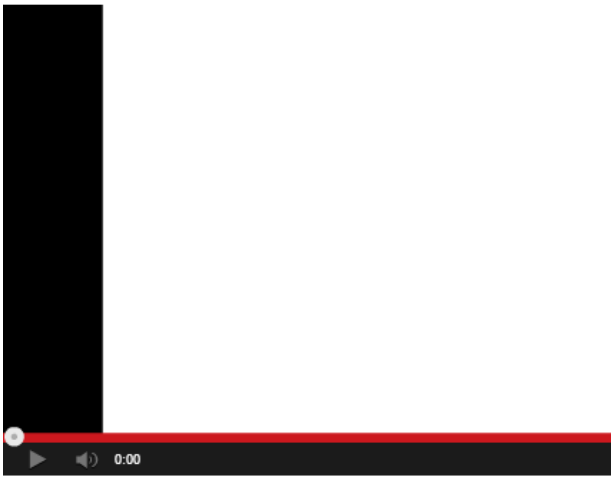
me," Arneson mutters. "He's lucky I didn't find him in a dark stairwell; we would have seen who'd kill who."

Gary Gygax, considered the father of role-playing gaming for his pioneering work on *Dungeons & Dragons*, attends a gaming convention, circa 1979. *Photo: Courtesy of Gail Gygax*

The game also set off a moral hysteria in the culture at large. On August 15, 1979, a D&D player named James Dallas Egbert III vanished from Michigan State University. Sensational stories soon hit the wires about a boy genius who supposedly disappeared in the steam tunnels under his university while enacting a real-life version of D&D. The game, which had been a cult phenomenon up until this point, started getting mainstream media attention. But not the kind that TSR wanted.

Patricia Pulling, a mother who claimed that her son shot himself in the chest as a result of a "curse" he received in a D&D game, founded an organization called B.A.D.D. (Bothered About Dungeons & Dragons). In 1982 there was a hilariously awful TV movie called *Mazes and Monsters*, which starred a 26-year-old Tom Hanks as an obsessive gamer unable to distinguish fantasy from reality. Jack Chick, a prolific author of religious tracts, published a comic called *Dark Dungeons*, which showed D&D players being inexorably drawn into a real-life coven.

"Somebody said they threw their copy of D&D into the fire, and it screamed," recalls Gygax incredulously. "It's a game! The magic spells in it are as real as the gold. Try retiring on that stuff." Calls from die-hard gamers to TSR's office were replaced with death threats. Gygax hired a bodyguard.



Mazes and Monsters

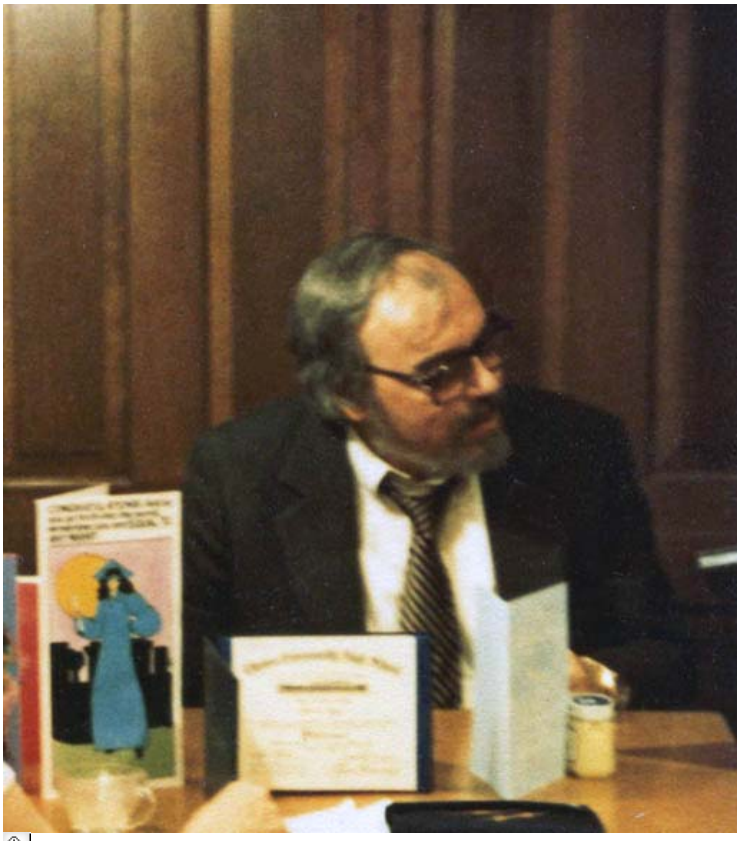
Arneson believes the hysteria surrounding the game would end immediately if kids would just invite their parents to watch as they play. "They're going to be so bored," he says. "They will understand that anything this nerdy can't possibly lead to being possessed by the devil."

The publicity had a predictable effect: In 1982, the company saw its annual D&D sales shoot up to $16 million. This game of math, maps, and probability had acquired an aura of the dangerous and forbidden. "We couldn't print the stuff fast enough," Gygax says.

You are Gary Gygax, and you are playing a business game called brand extension. You go to California to try to expand D&D into other media. You have some success, launching a Saturday morning cartoon based on the game. Your voice actors include cast members from Eight Is Enough *and* Happy Days, *as well as the legendary Frank Welker (aka Megatron from* Transformers. *The cartoon is popular, and it removes some of the stigma from the game.*

But you need more money, and you have to hand over the leadership reins to someone else back in Wisconsin. Do you choose to entrust your company to businessmen with no knowledge of tabletop games?

When Gygax went to Hollywood to close the deal on an animated show and explore a possible feature film based on D&D, the day-to-day operations of TSR were overseen by his fellow board members, brothers Kevin and Brian Blume. "They knew that I was in the midst of a divorce, so they figured I would be happy to go out to the West Coast and get away from my ex-wife," Gygax says. "They were $1.5 million in debt when I came back. There were 70-some odd company cars, something like $1.5 million in furniture."



Gygax celebrates his birthday in 1980, a few years after his company, Tactical Studies Rules, published the first version of *Dungeons & Dragons*. *Photo: Courtesy of Gail Gygax*

Gygax looked for someone with management experience to fix the problem. "I said, we're going to need somebody to get us over this period until we can get positive cash flow again," he says. Lorraine Williams, the mother of a writer he'd met in Hollywood, had management experience, and he brought her on board. "Worst mistake of my life. I think she was losing about $3 million a year. Which is pretty good, even better than the Blumes could do." Williams soon bought out the shares of the Blumes, and suddenly Gygax no longer had a controlling stake in TSR.

Arneson and Gygax's relationship had strained to the breaking point as well. The two had agreed at the outset to share credit, but the pact didn't withstand the growing pressures of success. "I approached him and said that the royalties we're paying are too high," Gygax says. "If we reduce them, sales will go up, and I'll make sure that we're paid for derivative works. He didn't agree with that, so he sued the company."

A settlement was reached, and neither party is allowed to discuss the terms of it. However, they have been credited as "cocreators" on the packaging of D&D ever since. The clash of the D&D titans would become the talk of GenCons and online flame wars for decades, with the stars occasionally throwing fuel to the fire. "His contributions were ideas, nothing more," Gygax says. "Dave can't design his way out of a paper bag."

Gygax in his office in Beverly Hills, California, a few years before he would leave TSR to develop offshoot role-playing games. *Photo: Courtesy of Gail Gygax*

"We each brought something, and we had fun," says Arneson, who now teaches a course on rules at Full Sail, a school of graphic arts and game design in Winter Park, Florida. "When the money came, people's personalities changed. That's all I'm going to say. Everything went fine when it was just a bunch of guys working out of basements. I wish that had gone on longer."

Gygax sold his remaining stake in TSR in late 1985. "I was so sick of the fucking company at that point, I was glad to get rid of it," Gygax says. "It was getting more and more screwed up all the time."

The man who a decade earlier had unleashed the dragons in a basement by a lake watched them go.

You are an American teenager in the 1970s. You love D&D. You map dungeons. You plan encounters, attempting to anticipate all the different ways people will react. You especially dig being a dungeon master, guiding your friends through your campaigns. You see that the field of role-playing games is exploding. Do you want to continue to play as a hobby? Or do you want to become a professional game designer?

Dungeons & Dragons had a way of turning game players into game designers. The rule set was pure potentiality, and the greater the

creativity of each dungeon master, the more the players could extract from it. Many young people found their calling while playing D&D.

"The ability to play an individual character in an imaginary world was astonishing," says Greg Costikyan, who devoted the summers of his teenage years to D&D. "It expanded the market for adventure games." Several tabletop companies sprang up in TSR's wake, such as Steve Jackson Games in Texas and West End Games in Pennsylvania. Costikyan designed acclaimed tabletop role-playing games for these TSR competitors, including a role-playing game built around the Star Wars license, and he designed the bizarre Toon, a role-playing game with the twisted physics and warped logic of Bugs Bunny-esque cartoons.

Meanwhile, college kids monkeying around on enormous mainframe computers found themselves drawn to the familiar systems of the game. In 1976, MIT student Will Crowther combined his interests in fantasy role-playing and spelunking to map out the first text-based adventure game, Colossal Cave Adventure. By typing in a direction, such as "north" or "south," or a command, as in "hit" or "attack," players could battle enemies and hunt for treasure. Before long, students and hackers in computer labs across the country were playing and modifying the text-based game's code. "It added automated moderation so you didn't need the human game master," says Don Woods, a Stanford student who created a spin-off with Crowther's blessing.

In 1978, students at the University of Essex in England pioneered a way to emulate the multiplayer experience of D&D across the Arpanet. Richard Bartle coded the first multiuser dungeon. A MUD is a text-based game with D&D mechanics of experience points and levels, and an emphasis on socialization and chatting. "MUD was just a continuation of what I was doing in D&D," Bartle says.

Richard Garriott encountered the game at computer camp in 1977. After organizing D&D sessions back home, he ported the role-playing experience into PC games like *Akalabeth* and later the *Ultima* franchise. He says that D&D's primordial game engine was a perfect match for number-crunching home computers. "D&D allowed people to build a numerical representation of themselves, a numerical representation of a monster, a numerical representation of how a character and monsters could interact," he says. "If there had never been D&D, computer games would be more like simple arcade games, like Pac-Man and Pong."

"That cooperative experience ports over really well to digital media, especially with the rise of the Internet," says Chris "Thundergod" Metzen, vice president of creative development at Blizzard Entertainment. His company's massively multiplayer role-playing game *World of Warcraft* attracts 10 million subscribers, who all pay to log into a 3-D virtual world and join other players in battling monsters, exploring for loot, and leveling up. "Players around the world are forming friendships and having adventures," Metzen says. "Part of the magic is that it hearkens back to those dateless nights playing D&D."

But as the style of gaming that D&D pioneered became increasingly popular, the original game was losing market share. TSR faced stiff competition from other tabletop game companies like White Wolf, as well as the growing popularity of collectible card games like Magic: The Gathering. The company became notorious for zealously protecting its intellectual property. TSR was soon referred to by geeks as T$R: They sue regularly. By 1997, the company was deeply in debt, and it was purchased by Wizards of the Coast, the company that made its fortunes with Magic: The Gathering.

Wizards of the Coast regained some goodwill and popularity with the release of the third edition of D&D rules in 2000. Gygax was brought in for a brief and somewhat symbolic consultation on the new rule set, as was Arneson. Gygax didn't approve of the decision to open-source the game. The third edition of the rules was made available under the Open Gaming License, which allowed anyone to modify or write games based on the core system for free. "It pretty much gives the store away," he says. "It ruins the uniqueness of D&D."

But the biggest threat D&D faced was not open-sourcing. It was *Everquest* and *World of Warcraft*. As the number of subscribers to massively multiplayer sword and sorcery games grew, Dungeons & Dragons ads began to appear in videogame magazines, with slogans like "If you're going to sit in your basement pretending to be an elf, you should at least have some friends over to help."

D&D Insider

The 4th Edition of the D&D rules will appear in June. Wizards of the Coast's latest strategy is to meet online games like *World of Warcraft* halfway. The company has launched a social networking site called Gleemax, which aims to be Facebook for tabletop gamers. And when the 4th Edition of the rule set appears this summer, it will launch alongside D&D Insider, a monthly subscription service that will allow people to use the Web for many aspects of D&D, from map creation to rule books to dice rolling.

Grown men who can no longer gather in a friend's basement every Friday night may want to reconnect via voice chat...or they may discover that *World of Warcraft* is simply more compelling. "Fourth Edition is far more than a new set of rules," wrote Slashdot Games editor Michael Zenke after the new products were announced. "It's WotC's lunge toward mainstream acceptance. WotC is going to make it big or break the tabletop industry trying."

You sit down at a table with a few other revelers on Gary Gygax's front porch. There are books and plants and games nearby. A fan slowly stirs the thick humid air. Gygax produces a cardboard tube and removes a large piece of graph paper from it. It is a hand-drawn map of his own design. There are green swirls representing trees, and tiny black squares for buildings.

Gygax spreads the map on the table in front of you and produces an enormous polyhedral die that's as black as onyx. He sparks up a Black & Mild cigar. His wife isn't looking, so he cracks open a second bottle of Guinness. Then he begins to guide you and the other players through this game he has created. "You leave the caravan and come to a village," he says. "You can stay here and see what's around. Who wants to go where?"

It's day three of the 2007 Lake Geneva Gaming Convention last summer, and Gary Gygax is delighted to be getting his game on. It's almost 40 years to the day since the first unofficial GenCon was held here in his hometown. The official GenCon is now a big corporate franchise and held several times a year in convention centers from Anaheim to Australia, drawing crowds of 30,000. Gygax resurrected his hometown alternative convention, and it has attracted just a few hundred fans. Some of those, the hardest of the hardcore, have been invited over to play a game scenario designed by the dungeon master himself.

He is leading players through a campaign of Lejendary Adventure, one of the dozen tabletop role-playing games he created after leaving TSR. "Lejendary Adventure is rules light," he says. "Life's too short to spend 60 hours a week crouching in front of a typewriter writing rules. The more you explain, the more you have to keep explaining. Use imagination and initiative, for heaven's sake!"

As the game progresses, Gygax veers from the scenario into a series of entertaining digressions. When the group enters a pub, he recites lines from Monty Python. As they learn of nearby river caves that may house treacherous beasts, he describes a dream he had in which an African elephant was chasing him around his backyard. At one point, he breaks into a spontaneous rendition of the song, "Too Fat Polka (I Don't Want Her, You Can Have Her, She's Too Fat for Me)." One or two brave members of his party join in.

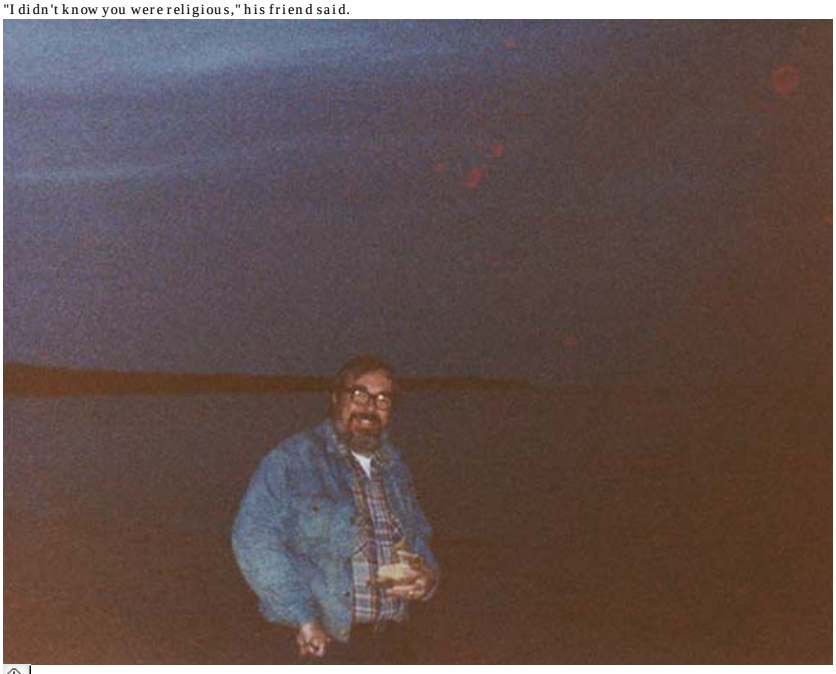
This is what Gygax thinks his legacy should be. People playing games together in the flesh, with a real, live dungeon master guiding them. That's what he thinks is wrong with the new direction for Dungeons & Dragons with its new 4th Edition. "D&D is not an online game," he says. "There is no role-playing in an online game that can match what happens in person."

Regardless of what happens to D&D, Gygax is satisfied with what his games have set in motion. "I think they've done a world of good for people, socially, mentally, educationally," he adds. "I think that's why I'm still alive now, because it's helped so many people." He's proud of what he's accomplished and proud of the influence his games have had. He tells me privately, "I only regret that I wasn't more outspoken in my beliefs."

While it may surprise – or embolden – the religious groups who long rallied against him, Gygax says he has found God. The discovery began one day about 25 years ago, fittingly, during a game. A friend of his was doing some role-playing with Gygax as a kind of personality test. He had Gygax describe his journey down an imaginary road. At one point, Gygax described coming to a clear lake, and his buddy said, "There's a drinking vessel there. What does it look like?"

"It's a beautiful silver chalice," Gygax replied, "all engraved."

"I didn't know you were religious," his friend said.



Gygax at Geneva Lake, close to his Wisconsin home, in the mid-1970s. *Photo: Courtesy of Gail Gygax*

Neither did Gygax, but he warmed to the idea that the universe has been mapped out in advance by some celestial designer. "There's got to be a creating hand behind everything," he says. "As Thomas Aquinas said, 'Out of nothing, nothing comes.'"

Over the past few years, Gygax has suffered two minor strokes, a heart attack, and a series of falls. And, he says, it was his newfound beliefs that sustained him. He began to pray frequently that he would regain the movement that he lost in his arm and leg after his most recent stroke. And it was an experience inside a game that prepared him for his ultimate journey, too. At the completion of the round, he tells me, the game master said, "You've come to a wall. The wall is the end. It's death. What do you do?"

Gygax looked him in the eye and said, "I jump over it. When you come to the end and you can't go any farther, you've got to go over the wall. Gotta see what's there."

Contributing editor David Kushner (david@davidkushner.com) *wrote about AI researchers in 15.02.*

Correction:

[1]The photo of Gygax from the 1970 GenCon convention was originally attributed to Gail Gygax, but was given to *Wired* by John Bobek.

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